The Fourth Church Pulpit

FATHERHOOD: HUMAN AND DIVINE

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A Prayer for Families

Eternal God, our creator, you set us to live in families. We commend to your care all the homes where people live. Keep them, we pray, free from bitterness, from thirst for personal victory, and from pride in self. Fill them with faith, virtue, knowledge, moderation, patience, and godliness. Knit together in enduring affection those who have become one in marriage. Let children and parents have full respect for one another; and light the fire of kindliness among us all, that we may show affection for each other; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Book of Common Worship
The Presbyterian Church (USA)

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Scripture
Galatians 4:1-7
Mark 14:32-36

"Because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!'"
Galatians 4:6 (NRSV)

I have never before preached a Father's Day sermon. A friend, good churchman and a careful observer of clergy behavior over several decades, called me to account for it once.

> "I've been listening to sermons for fifty years," he said. "Used to be on Mother's Day the minister preached on motherhood. On Father's Day — fatherhood. Equal time. But I haven't heard a Father's Day sermon for a long time. Isn't it important any more, or after five children are you simply admitting ... that you don't know much about the subject?"

We laughed, and I mumbled something about a preacher's personal experience not being the point, and besides, Father's Day, like Mother's Day, isn't an official church holiday but a product of the greeting card industry. "Well," he said, "from all I can read and see, it's a pretty important topic so why don't you go ahead and do it sometime." That was at least fifteen years ago.

Part of the reason you don't hear Father's Day sermons is that in the yearly pantheon of holidays and celebrations Father's Day is not near the top of the list. My childhood experience was modest, at best. My father was a railroader and wasn't home for many observances. The gifts were unexciting and inexpensive. Railroad handkerchiefs — those big blue ones railroaders wore around their necks originally to keep out the hot cinders — and a package of Gillette razor blades. One year I'd buy the hankies and my brother took care of the razor blades. The next year we'd switch. It made shopping simple.

But there are other reasons as well. There's a lot going on these days around the topic, a lot of analysis, a lot of critiquing of traditional models, a lot of new awareness of spouse abuse, of absentee fatherhood. Sam Keen, in his best-seller *Fire in the Belly*, a book not universally appreciated by women, writes:

> "Ask almost anyone, 'How does it feel to be a man these days?' Those who pause long enough to consider their (gut) feelings will likely tell you they feel blamed, demeaned and attacked." [p.6]

Maybe many, if not most of us, aren't quite sure what to say, or how to say what we want to say without sounding defensive. So — here goes.

There is a moment in public worship which men in general and fathers in particular experience differently and uniquely. It's the opening phrase of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, ..." We know a secret. Someone made a big mistake in punctuation in the Apostles' Creed. We recite it as if it were one phrase — "I believe in God the Father Almighty." Actually, there's a pair of commas: "I believe in God" — comma — "the Father Almighty" — comma. The mistake is that the second comma belongs after Father. So that it should read, "I believe in God," comma, "the Father," comma, "Almighty, ..." Because we know deep down in our hearts that there is no such thing as an Almighty Father. We know that Almighty Fatherhood is an oxymoron and, further, I propose that when Jesus called God father he meant something radically, fundamentally different from Almightiness.

My daughter, for Father's Day one year, gave me a book of photographs of men and children. It's lovely. I like to look at it a lot. Dave Barry, the humorist, wrote an introduction that speaks to the point.

Barry's son Rob, age 12, was hit by a car while riding his bicycle. In every parent's worst nightmare, someone came to the door and told them there had been an accident — he's on the street, there's a lot of blood. Rob survived with a broken leg and an assortment of cuts and bruises. But Dave Barry later reflected wisely on parenthood — fatherhood.

> "When he was happy, I was happier then I'd ever been: but when he was in trouble ... I can remember every detail of the time when, at a few months, he got a bad fever, 106 degrees, his tiny body burning, and I carried him into the hospital, thinking, 'I can't take this, please let me be able to stop this, please give me this fever, take it out of this little boy and put it in me, please ...' But you can't do that. You can't make it happen to you. You have to watch it happen to your child." [Bruce Velick, *dads*]

As he comforted his injured son, who was now apologizing for being hit by a car, Barry reflected that the feelings of vulnerability don't go away, but lurk inside, "forcing me to accept that I wasn't in control anymore."

At the heart of this topic is an image of what it means to be a man that is at least problematic and at worst demonic. In his book, Sam Keen says that at the age of 17, and I think he's at least five years too late in that analysis, youngsters receive many specific messages about what it means to be a man:

> Join a fraternity
> Letter in a sport
> Have sex with lots of girls
> Be tough ... fight
> Don't show feelings
> Drink lots of beer — and/or do lots of drugs

I think he's right. The culture says those things: in advertising, motion pictures, television, music. Be tough, have sex, don't show or have feelings. Don't be vulnerable.

Keen observes that the sports we organize for our children, formerly boys only, are highly competitive; winning is the point, beating your opponent. A Little League coach who naively assumes that participation, teamwork, learning skills and having fun are the point is in for a rude shock. A personal defining moment for me was to try gently to restrain a father who stormed out of the bleachers and grabbed his eleven-year-old linebacker, who had missed a tackle, by the shoulders, shaking him and demanding, at the top of his voice, to know whether he had any courage at all, whether he would ever be a man.

James Dittes, a professor at Yale, in a book, *The Male Predicament*, writes:

> "You grow up to be a man who is self-reliant, a man who will study the roadways by flashlight, drive around blocks and blocks, never pull into a gas station to ask directions, curse the incompetence of the highway engineers, and snap at the passenger who makes a suggestion." [p.26]

I found that a little meddlesome. Frankly, I have noticed that the Illinois Department of Transportation is a conspiracy to keep me from finding my way on my own and arriving where I want to go without help from anyone!

The problem is that the image, the model of manhood fostered by popular American culture, isn't funny at all. In fact, it's deadly.

Newsweek magazine proposed that the time has come for a new agenda. Femaleness is not the problem.

> "We are not burdened by too much nurturance or empathy. The problem is men — or more accurately — maleness. Men are killing themselves doing all the things our society wants them to do. At every age they're dying in accidents, they're being shot, they drive cars badly, they're two-fisted drinkers. And violence against women is pervasive. Maybe it's men's raging hormones, or because they're trying to be a man." ["Guns and Dolls," *Newsweek* 5/28/90, cited by Keen]

But perhaps worst of all is the emergence of a model of fatherhood without any resultant responsibility. A feature on the front page of the *New York Times* this morning, "Creating Fathers Out of Men With Children," focused on the enormous social and economic problems which result from young men not functioning as fathers to their children.

It isn't just a sub-culture any longer, one expert reflected. We have a culture of fatherlessness. Nearly 25 percent of American newborns live in homes without fathers.

Eleanor Holmes Norton, a liberal female, and Pete Wilson, a conservative male, both stood up last week and said that "fatherlessness is the number one problem in America." [*New York Times*, 6/18/95]

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan makes everybody uncomfortable by identifying the way we have of accommodating rather than challenging and changing developing paradigms in our culture. He calls it "defining deviancy down" and focuses on fatherlessness a devastating social problem which we are in the process of redefining as inevitable, acceptable, finally normal. He's not talking about, nor am I, single mothers who are doing a courageous, attentive, and effective job of parenting. He's talking about the way the culture simply assumes that a man who impregnates a woman to whom he is not legally and finally committed is free to walk away with a smile on his face and increasingly is almost encouraged to do so.

The rhetoric of personal responsibility which is most popular politically these days is, after all, focused entirely on women. "Welfare moms" and their children will pay the price for this new frugality and responsibility. Men are free, apparently, to continue their participation in random sexual intercourse without an iota of responsibility.

Even the way we discuss this very real problem reveals the bias. "Unwed mothers" we say, but what about "unwed fathers"?

Writing in *The Nation*, Katha Pollitt wonders why politicians always focus on women's sexual behavior but not men's. In an angry essay, "Fair is Fair," she observes that 50% of welfare mothers are on public assistance because the fathers of their children have simply abandoned them or refuse to pay child support.

> "What would happen," she asks, "if mothers abandoned children at the rate fathers do? A woman who leaves a newborn in the hospital and never returns for it still makes headlines ... You'd need a list as thick as the New York City phone book to name the men who have no idea where or how many or who their children are." [*Utne Reader*, May-June, 1995 p.76]

It makes me uncomfortable, but I think she's right. Fathers who walk away are the basic problem.

We have experienced a revolution in the traditional roles of men and women. Dr. Alvin Poussaint, who teaches psychiatry at Yale and who was the script consultant for *The Cosby Show*, has written a preface for Bill Cosby's book, *Fatherhood* (which my son gave me on another Father's Day) and tells a story that is familiar to many of us. Father as breadwinner and disciplinarian, mother as homemaker and mediator. "Wait 'till your father gets home" was threat enough to restore order. They both worked hard. Pouissaint's father kept seven children off welfare and wasn't home much. He didn't express much feeling — missed getting to know his children. Dr. Poussaint got to know his father only in the last months of his life when he became human in dying and is grateful for that.

He makes an important point. The old model was limited, but it is not without value. Feeding your children, after all, is one important way of saying you care. And, I would add, infinitely better than abandoning them. One of the gifts for which I am grateful is a father who worked hard and provided and made his family secure.

Fathers are part of the scheme of things. Everyone knows that we need fathers economically and socially. We also need fathers personally. The evidence is the psychological damage and personal dysfunction which results from an absent father, or the wrong kind of fathering.

Some carry the very deep scars of physical abuse, and worse, incest even.

Some carry the painful wounds of abandonment, and the life-long burden of knowing your father didn't care.

The *New York Times* article told about a program in Cleveland to try to coax young men who have never seen a stable, loving father to become responsible. The founder of the program, Charles Ballard, starts by getting the young men to talk about their own absentee fathers.

It's difficult. In addition to the fact that many of the young men have never seen their fathers, or their experience of fatherhood is almost entirely negative, they don't want to seem to have any feelings about the topic.

But once Mr. Ballard gets them talking there is anger, resentment, hurt, often rage and almost always tears. Then comes an openness to talk about being the kind of fathers they never had.

The revolution has happened. There are new and better ways of being men and women, fathers and mothers. And there is, I submit, a very important resource which we Biblically-oriented Christians have to bring to the emerging new patterns and models and paradigms.

Jesus called God "Father." He lived in a patriarchal culture in a patriarchal era. There were feminine images for God, many of them very old. In fact, ancient Israel contrasted sharply with its neighbors in the role of women in society, religion, politics. That was gone, however, by Jesus' day. Jesus lived in a culture that relegated women to second-class status and part of the very visibility and dramatic contrast of the community which gathered around him was the prominent role played by women in it.

At the heart of his Jewish monotheism was a God who will not be confined to human images of maleness or femaleness. His faith was careful to say that men and women are made in God's image: maleness and femaleness ... Jesus did not, could not, have imaged God as an old man in a white robe that our culture has.

The unique theology of Judaism focused on God's mystery, God's transcending of all human attempts to contain God (thus the aversion to idols), but at the same time God's nearness, accessibility, closeness.

It was in the most critical moment of his life that Jesus called God by a remarkable name. He was in the Garden Gethsemane moments before his betrayal and arrest. He knew, I think, that there was no turning back now. He knew now that he was going to die. What do you pray in a moment like that? What do you say to God when you know your life is over?

Jesus said "Abba." It's a term of endearment, an intimate name. It is the word a child would use for his or her father, in the home, in the security and safety of his mother's and father's love. "Daddy" is the only viable English translation. It has everything to do with closeness and love — and vulnerability.

The God Jesus called on in that critical moment was not going to reach into his life and take from him the cup which he was about to drink.

Fathers can't do that. Dave Barry couldn't protect his son. Frederick Buechner tells the moving story of his daughter's anorexia.

> "The only **way** I knew to be a father was to take care of her, as my father had been unable to take care of me, to move heaven and earth if necessary to make her well and, of course I couldn't do that. The best I could do as her father was to stand back and give her that freedom even at the risk of her using it to choose for death instead of life." [*Telling Secrets*, p.26, 27]

What emerges here is a Christian image of fatherhood and manhood which has far more to do with limits than Almightiness, far more to do with self-giving than self-enhancement, far more to do with vulnerability than willfulness and influence and success and power.

Sam Keen says the lesson in Gethsemane is that a man is most virile not when he insists upon his own way, autonomous will, but when he harmonizes his will with God and gives life away to those who need him and depend on him.

For fathers — the word is: you matter a great deal. Your children are at risk without you. Your responsibility for them is what God has in mind.

For men — the word is: you reflect a part of the image of God. Not all of it, to be sure. There is a feminine image of God — but our recovery of that very important truth does not negate this truth. For men — all of us, fathers or not fathers, husbands or unmarried, the word is: the children need us. All of us. The little boys and little girls need our nurture, our care, our provision, our demonstration of what it is to be a man.

For all of us: women, mothers, men, fathers — the word is that God, regardless of the metaphors we employ, the names we use, is as close as a loving parent, a father or mother — whose vulnerability is expressed in love: whose love means that he/she will not remove us from all danger, but in whose love, nevertheless, we are ultimately and finally and absolutely, safely, at home.

> "... Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful ..." [*A Brief Statement of Faith*]

Amen.